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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT FORMATION UPDATE: VERY CLOSE COUNT ON THE SHIA ISLAMIST PRIME MINISTER RACE

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT S. FORD FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: In the competition for Iraq's Shia Islamist Coalition (List 555) to name a prime minister nominee, we estimate that incumbent Prime Minister Jafari has a slim lead on challenger Adil Abd al-Mahdi, but the race is too close to call. On February 11, Shia Coalition members decided to postpone until the following day a decision on their candidate for Prime Minister. The Sadrist called a meeting on February 11 to affirm their bloc's choice for PM; they appear to be consolidating their bloc's support for Jafari. Sadrist Minister of State for Civil Society Affairs told PolOffs that most of the Shia Islamist Coalition leaders were afraid to allow a vote because they supported Abd al-Mahdi, but if there were a vote Jafari would win. Backers of Abd al-Mahdi were announcing that a major group within the Shia Coalition, the Fadhila Party, would back Abd al-Mahdi - throwing him vital support. However, two Abd al-Mahdi aides told us late February 11 in private that Fadhila leader Jabiri has not made up his mind as to which of the two lead candidates to support. Abd al-Mahdi has to have Fadhila's support as well as that of the majority of List 555 independents to win. Jafari can win without Fadhila, but he needs a large minority of the independent deputies of List 555 to back him to win. The race is exceptionally close, with every one of the 128 List 555 deputies' votes counting. End Summary.

List 555 News Conference

¶2. (U) In a February 11 news conference broadcast on Al Iraqiya TV, TNA Constitutional Drafting Committee Chair and senior SCIRI leader Sheikh Humam Hamudi, senior Dawa Party leader Jawad al-Maliki, and Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Ameri announced that one of the groups within the Shia Islamist Coalition had asked that for a delay in a decision on PM until February 12. (Note: A vote will take place if the Coalition parties do not reach a consensus before the February 12 meeting. End Note.) Sheikh Hamudi, a support of fellow SCIRI party member Abd al-Mahdi for prime minister, also announced that the Shia Coalition's Fadhila Party would support Abd al-Mahdi in the race. Late February 11 Abd al-Mahdi appeared on SCIRI's al-Furat TV claiming he had the support for Fadhila and the List 555 independents.

An Offer for Fadhila

¶3. (C) President Jalal Talabani told the Ambassador on

February 10 evening that SCIRI has offered to make Fadhila Party General Secretary Nadeem al-Jabiri a Deputy Speaker of the Council of Representatives (CoR) and give Fadhila control of two ministries in return for Fadhila's support of Abd al-Mahdi. Likewise, Haitham al-Husseini, SCIRI Chief-of-Staff, told PolOff in a February 11 phone conversation that Fadhila would support Abd al-Mahdi for the PM position. However, the Baghdad rumor mill was saying February 11 that Jafari's offer was higher than SCIRI's.

Sadrists For Jafari

¶4. (C) Nasser al-Saadi of the Sadr Bureau announced on Al Iraqiya TV that the Sadrists support PM Jafari, but they will not withdraw from the Coalition if Jafari is not elected. According to a variety of reports, the Sadrists held a meeting on February 11 to decide whom they will support.

¶5. (C) Sadr State Minister for Civil Society Affairs Ala'a Khadim al Safi told PolOffs February 11 that most of the Shia Coalition leaders back Abd al-Mahdi. However, most of the 128 deputies would vote for Jafari, and hence the Coalition leaders were delaying a vote. He predicted that Jabiri dropping from the competition would result in Abd al-Mahdi picking up Fadilah votes.

Independents to Back Abd al-Mahdi?

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¶6. (C) According to SCIRI's Haitham al-Husseini, most independents will vote to back Abd al-Mahdi. Qassem Daoud, one of the 26 independents, also told us the same thing on February 11. One story making the rounds is that the independents would vote as a single bloc. However, Sami al-Askari, a 555 independent, predicted to us on February 11 that the independents would split their votes. Most would go for Abd al-Mahdi, but he stated that he and some others would vote for PM Jafari.

Abd al-Mahdi Advisors Think It's Too Close to Call

¶7. (C) In a February 11 meeting, two of Abd al-Mahdi's advisors, Fareed Yaseen and Zuhair Humadi, told PolOffs that the prime minister race is still too close to call. Humadi said that Fadhila Party's Nadim al-Jabiri had not yet made up his mind on which candidate to support. Yaseen said he was unaware that the Sadrists held an internal vote today and surmised that it was the reason the Coalition did not announce the premiership.

¶8. (C) Regarding cabinet positions, Humadi was confident that Barham Salih would become a Deputy Prime Minister and Hussayn Shahristani would be appointed Deputy President. Yasseen said Abd al-Mahdi would insist the Oil Ministry would not go to Fadhila next time. Instead, it would go to a qualified technocrat like Thamir Ghadban. Humadi suggested that Qasim Daoud would make a good Interior Minister. Most notably, Humadi said there would be no role for Jafari -- he could accept a deputy speaker position or go back to London, Humadi said.

The Scorecard

¶9. (C) Assuming, however, that Fadhila does back Abd al-Mahdi, the vote would be as follows:

For DP Mehdi:

15 SCIRI
15 Badr
15 Fadhila
Total: 45

For PM Ja'fari:

12 Dawa
13 Dawa Tanzim
28 Sadrists
Total: 53

Comment

¶10. (C) The figures above leave 26 independents and four "entities with no Coalitions," such as tribal sheikhs, to decide the race. Jafari must have the support of 12 independents/entities to win a 65 vote majority. Abd al-Mehdi would need the support of 20 independents/entities. In our checking with various Shia political sources, we hear that Jafari is likely to win somewhere around 8 - 12 independents. The numbers above assume that all Coalition members are in Baghdad to vote. We believe some may miss the vote.

KHALILZAD